



Op-Ed

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The Right Move for Indiana's K-3 Students

By Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett

Last week, legislators made an important move to improve student achievement. They passed legislation (HB 1367) instructing the Indiana State Board of Education and the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to develop a K-3 plan for reading instruction and implement accountability by mandating retention for third-grade students who, after 720 days of reading instruction, do not have the skills necessary to be successful..

Teaching students to read is elementary educators' primary responsibility, and it's a duty Indiana's teachers are well equipped to fulfill. Research shows targeting intensive reading interventions in the early grades works. This new legislation empowers the IDOE to direct existing resources and funding to K-3 reading instruction so every child enters the fourth grade able to read.

To protect the integrity of our promise to teach all students to read, we will not socially promote students who cannot read into a future of failure. No amount of intervention or resources will be successful if we're not able to retain students who aren't ready to advance. Any plan to improve reading achievement, then, must be twofold: We must implement a statewide Reading Framework to improve reading instruction, and we must execute accountability by retaining students who cannot read. HB 1367 does both.

This legislation is the next step in IDOE's efforts to make reading the state's top educational priority. In October 2009, IDOE hosted a Reading Summit to raise awareness about the need for a statewide reading framework and a strategy to target early literacy instruction. Indiana's ten-member Reading Advisory Council of K-12 and higher education reading experts was established in November 2009 to collaborate with IDOE and craft Indiana's Reading Framework.

Once the framework is complete this spring, IDOE will assist schools across the state in evaluating the ways they teach reading and assess students' ability. A handful of Opportunity Schools will be selected to pilot the framework during the 2010-2011 school year. Teachers will receive extensive professional development on how to effectively incorporate Indiana's Reading Framework to their curriculum in a manner that aligns with their unique student populations.

The new legislation instructs IDOE to provide a research-based framework for schools to implement effective early-reading instruction and intervention. Make no mistake: Reading is the state's top instructional priority, and local schools are expected to prioritize reading, as well. This may involve schools reexamining their school day and finding ways to incorporate reading into all other subject areas. The Reading Framework will meaningfully assist classroom efforts, and I have complete confidence that our state's educators will succeed.

That being said, our schools need more help to provide every student the skills they need to be strong readers. They need support from their communities, parents, businesses and organizations. They need volunteers, community advocates and supporters. With an initiative called *Read On, Indiana!*, IDOE will encourage public engagement for reading education statewide. To lead this important initiative, I will assemble the Indiana Reading Task Force, made up of reading experts and community leaders from across the state.

Indiana's legislators should be commended for taking this step to improve early literacy instruction. Still, there is much to be done if we are to ensure all Hoosier students are literate. IDOE will use this momentum to ignite bigger conversations and encourage action that will improve student achievement.